

Tampa Bay Barge Collision, Tampa, Hillsborough County, FL

On August 10, 1993, three vessels collided at the entrance to Tampa Bay, Florida, resulting in the release of an estimated 328,000 gallons of oil. Two barges, one containing number six fuel oil and one containing jet fuel, gasoline, and diesel fuel, and a Philippine freighter carrying phosphate rock were involved. A damaged fuel tank aboard the barge Bouchard 155 (B-155) was the source of most of the oil released, forming a 17-mile oil slick on the water surrounding the vessel. The second barge, the Ocean 255, exploded and caught fire upon impact.

The Tampa Bay Fire Department initially responded to the fire on the barge Ocean 255, while the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the barge owners cooperated in the oil spill response activities. The cleanup was financed by both barge owners, working together by dividing tasks and geographic sectors among several contractors.

The initial spill response effort consisted mainly of skimming operations to recover spilled oil from the bay, and transferring the remaining oil on the B-155 to other barges. Within a month after the spill, all loose oil in the area had been recovered, totalling 147,131 gallons from offshore skimming operations and 130,500 gallons of oil/water mixture from inshore operations.

The USCG led the response to the freighter Balsa 37. USCG personnel pushed the freighter aground to prevent it from sinking, then patched holes in the vessel. The USCG also participated in the responses to the two barges, but these efforts were led by the vessel owners. Coast Guard skimming systems, cutters, and other marine and land recovery equipment were employed in the response.

Expansion of the spill to the nearby shore due to high winds quickly turned efforts to beach clean up and wildlife recovery. The environmental impacts of the spill incident extended to two miles of sandy beach, affecting birds, turtles and other wildlife and their habitats in a park along the Gulf of Mexico. The Coast Guard's On-Scene Coordinator (OSC) enlisted technical support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the State of Florida Department of Natural Resources to assist in the onshore cleanup efforts. As many as 1,800 professionals and volunteers assisted in cleaning up the oil that came ashore.

The incident acquired significance as the first major demonstration of the USCG vessel response plan requirements. The Coast Guard OSC praised the cooperation and timely efforts of the responsible party and state officials in cleanup and obtaining permits for disposal of the recovered oil and oily sand. Response participants successfully dealt with a complex spill including offshore, nearshore, shallow water, and beach cleanup, and cleanup in environmentally sensitive areas.